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A PLEA FOR A MORE DIRECT METHOD IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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I would fain have any man name to me that tongue, that anyone can learn to speak as he should do, by the rules of grammar. . . . It will possibly be asked here, "Is grammar then of no use?" . . . I say not so; grammar has its place too. But this I think I may say, there is more stir a great deal than there needs, and those are tormented about it to whom it does not at all belong; I mean children. . . . —Locke, *Thoughts Concerning Education*.

Locke was the standard-bearer of a spiritual procession whose members, since Aristotle led it forth, have essayed the quest of what is most worth while with sheer, cold intellect as their single light. Whenever this procession has recruited largely from the multitude, the consequence has been formalism. Unable and unwilling to continue the endless march, the rank and file have made a record of discoveries, and pitched their camp just as the dying leader resigned torch and standard to a younger hand. From their records they have drawn rigid laws. By these they have tried to live.

The division of this long procession, which took the name utilitarianism, drew throngs behind its banner. And when they camped, a proper form had been constructed or remodeled for every human activity and feeling. Moreover, it had been systematically calculated what and how much were required for the greatest human gain.

To a nation whose attention was necessarily engrossed by pioneer enterprises no boon could have seemed greater. With their inherited veneration for authority, and the tired toiler's awe of the printed word, Americans accepted and applied, never doubting. They had no time to doubt.

It is not amazing, then, that now that our nation has time to question, its regular, "substantial" thinkers cling still to the principle which has worked, they think, so well, having made them

what they are. The methods, indeed, they alter, and miraculous achievements result. But still with the practical, the hard-headed, it is the same old principle they adhere to—what is most profitable. And they call their slogan, now, "Efficiency."

Now the effect of American acceptance of the principle and precepts of the calculating rationalists has been twofold in its relation to education. It has bestowed a sort of intellectual sanction upon the American weakness of taking a short cut. And it has made all our subordinate and many of our chief educators devote a disproportionate time to teaching forms.

This two-fold effect has been, and continues to be, marked with respect to the teaching of English. A nation most of whose grandfathers went to college—the few of them who went—from homes in which the Bible, an old book of sermons, and *Poor Richard's Almanac* were the chief means of spiritual illumination, must not be severely censured because its teachers tried to pay allegiance to the King's English by courses in grammar, rhetoric, and the history of literature. They supposed that they were offering a short cut to a mastery of the tongue. And because they could point to a sporadic Longfellow and Daniel Webster, the lack of general ability to use the language with freedom and precision gave them no concern.

But that excuse of pioneer preoccupation will not hold for the generation of today. We are beginning to recognize that the salvation of our republic hangs upon the ability of the ordinary man to *think*. And he must think more swiftly, deeply, and extensively than ever the forefathers thought. Moreover, what he thinks he must be able clearly to say.

Yet we remain in thrall to that short-cut system. And we English teachers are allowed to suppose—some of us—that a large part of our duty is done when a fair percentage of our pupils can analyze a sentence, steer clear *in class* of the graver solecisms, give the names and some writings of half a dozen authors, and define, and very, very crudely illustrate "the four forms of prose discourse." To be sure we are required to make our pupils read a few specified books—and to ask them to read a few more—which, in many schools, they are hardly expected to assimilate, which some

of the teachers themselves do not really appreciate, and which many of the pupils look upon as unescapable but tedious "home-work."

This is wrong! It is indefensible even with crass efficiency as the standard. And it is refreshing to find that even Locke, one of the ancestors of utilitarianism, long ago exposed the folly of such teaching.

Unfortunately, however, it is never the spirit of the leader which gets codified when the rank and file stop marching to draw up their laws. Today, when so-called educators, untouched by that spirit, are vociferating about our supreme duty to prepare the boy "to make his bread and butter" and the girl to make bread and hats, it may be, if not *profitable*, at least salutary to remind ourselves afresh that "man does not live by bread alone."

Education is truly provided when a wise, sympathetic, and patient effort is made to develop in every boy and girl "an understanding truly adorned with a beautiful and fine temper." Those living words must ever stand as the mark at which the true teacher will aim.

And now, when two years of a modern language and one year of history are the only other fructifying subjects required of an increasing proportion of our high-school graduates, it is the more imperative that English teaching should be aimed at that high and difficult mark.

But what surer way is there to cultivate in boys and girls the needful insight, discrimination, temperance, sympathy, and comic sense than to bring them by due gradation into affectionate intimacy with "the best that has been known and thought"? It was Socrates who said, "Who converseth with that which is beautiful and divine, as far as is possible for man, becomes himself beautiful and divine."

A consequence of this emphasis upon direct contact with the *heart* of fine books would be a stiffening of the conscience. A person—even a child—who has come to love truth abhors inexactness; surplusage nauseates him; and indirectness gives him pain. Inevitably there accompanies this sensitiveness avidity for the acquisition of words, and scrupulosity in employing them. A moral imperative

presses upon the real lover of truth to get his full meaning precisely expressed. And in reading he exults over a complex thought adroitly uttered. So he eagerly evolves a technique of composition.

The natural objection to all this is that the high-school boy or girl is not in this exalted degree a jealous lover of truth, and that it is not practical to try to make him such. Then shall we continue to set him, instead, "for practical purposes," the task of learning:

the inflection of nouns and pronouns; agreement of pronoun with antecedent and of verb with subject; distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs, between the active and the passive voice; conjunctions co-ordinate and subordinate; distinction between the present and present perfect, the past and the past perfect; consistency in the use of tenses, the distinctive uses of the indicative and the subjunctive moods; common uses of the infinitive and participles, verbal nouns; auxiliaries in verb phrases; the various adverb relations expressed by word, phrase, and clause; the objective complement; the adverbial objective; [and] simpler idiomatic and elliptical expressions of standard English?

Shall we occupy nearly a second fifth of our pupil's English hours with such formal matters as "the principles of punctuation; . . . the principles of unity and coherence; variety in sentence structure; the structure of the whole composition and methods of paragraph development"?

Before we close our minds to this appeal for more intense culture and thus reaffirm our policy of applying forms from without instead of developing a *substance* which will spontaneously take form, let us consider. Let us ask ourselves if our rationalistic, short-cut method will actually achieve efficiency. Let us further ask whether, as sensitive listeners prefer a musician whose technique is a manifestation of a musical soul to one whose technique is merely following directions, we shall not prefer enfranchised personality to artificial correctness of speech.

It will be granted that most good writers do not stir us by reason of applying principles. Imagine Carlyle saying to himself, "Go to, now, I will develop this paragraph by the method of comparison and contrast." Figure to yourself Byron determining to employ a metaphor.

¹ The above quotations are selected from a state *Syllabus for Secondary Schools*.

But American education is adapted, we say, to the ordinary needs of the plain man. Nevertheless it is a trite remark that a number of the pupils most proficient in stating the uses of the infinitive and classifying adverbial modifiers write compositions that are "unutterably dull." And it is likewise generally observed that many of them use "atrocious English" outside of school. The same phenomena may be observed with respect to pupils who can tell you with a measure of correctness the distinction between exposition and narration, and enumerate without a gasp the methods of paragraph development.

A teacher of English in a prominent high school, who graduated first in her class, told me an experience of her high-school days which is fairly typical. As a class exercise she memorized all the rules for punctuation in her grammar. A few days later her teacher, who, be it known, was exceptionally efficient, called her attention to her latest composition. It was very unsatisfactory. The difficulty was that the lack of accurate punctuation left it utterly incoherent.

Damaging as such facts are to the claim of efficiency for formal grammar, they will be met by alleging the greater inefficiency of "mere culture." In response to the recommendation that we substitute for regular grammatical instruction the cultivation of taste and the stimulation of the whole soul, good grammar-teachers will insist that any amount of reading good books and hearing precise speech in class will not counteract the corrupting influence of the usual conversation of parents and mates. Is the knowledge of grammatical nomenclature and rules more efficacious in saving from the contamination of environment? It is, indeed, less so; for the former method leads children to be critics of their environment. And when they outgrow the delusion that "the way our folks has always did" is the best way, then they begin to be saved.

Moreover, the promising, spirited youth who detests grammar; and, supposing that to be what "English" means, feels no enthusiasm for any English work, must have more consideration. There are teachers who regard such an attitude as indicative of innate perversity, and by punitive measures compel the learning of principles they deem indispensable, or drive the child from school.

But it is relatively true today as it was in 400 B.C. that "no piece of compelled learning is lasting in the soul."

However, the strong defense of teachers of formal grammar remains intact. We read that "the right study of grammar will help to develop power of thought."¹ Supposing that to be indisputable, we may be permitted to inquire if there be not within the legitimate field of English even better means of intellectual discipline. To some of us it would appear that the analysis of thoughts is a fitter means of strengthening mental grasp and arousing critical zeal than the dissection of clauses. And do not rightly guided exercises in the preparation of debating briefs and forensics also offer more effective drill? They, too, unlike formal grammar, furnish the mind meanwhile.

The second of our two questions remains to be answered. What are the tendencies of overemphasis of formal grammar with respect to the evolution of personality? Expert teachers of grammar declare that their attachment to it arises, in considerable measure, from the supposed fact that it furnishes "something definite." Without adverting to the numerous instances of disagreement of the doctors on minor points, or expatiating on the prolonged discussion of authorities concerning what, really, is a noun, we come to the query, Is definiteness a good?

The most salient feature of definite laws is their utter lack of real finality. And, what is more to the point, the most tragic as well as comic disaster in human lives is the cessation of growth, due—at least partly—to false confidence in the possession of views that are definite, final.

The whole question may be put in this form: Whom should we wish to see live again in our country, a horde of minor Benjamin Franklins with absolute utilitarian maxims, and frequent gross violations thereof, or a host of Abraham Lincolns, with, perhaps, unquestionable imperfections, but surely, in some degree, sweet, sympathetic devotion, expressed always by suiting their action to the exigencies of the particular occasion? The one had definite precepts which he diverged from at pleasure; the other had a consuming love of truth.

¹*Op. cit.*

Now, it must not be supposed that this article is advocating anything other than readjustment of stress. There must be persistent correction of errors in speech. Compositions must be rigidly marked; and it must be insisted that errors be rectified, an appeal being made at the same time to the common-sense of the writer. It will doubtless be of use to have simple manuals of good usage to which the pupil may be referred for specific points, as the occasion arises. And at all times tightness of grip upon thoughts and sharpness of images must be demanded with rigor.

It is by no means proposed that formal grammar be excised from our curricula. What I should like to suggest is this: let there be in every thoroughly equipped school an expert in grammar, offering to studious Seniors an elective course, taking as a basis the knowledge of simple terminology acquired in the eighth grade and employed as convenience may have demanded during earlier high-school years.

Let the instructor in grammar be equipped, as few grammar teachers now are, with a background of familiar knowledge of etymology, comparative philology, and, most significant of all, the relationship obtaining between the growth of languages and the growth of humanity. A teacher so prepared could make the teaching of pure grammar—no longer entirely formal—humane, provided only that he were human.

But in the regular teaching of English let us take our pupils to live in intimacy with the true kings and heroes of our race. It will then become superfluous to tabulate the contents of their wardrobes, or even to present categorically the kind, weight, and quantity of viands in the royal pantries.

“For,” to conclude with one more sentence from the *Republic*, “this is neither impossible to happen, nor do we talk impossibilities, though we ourselves confess that they are difficult.”